Naming, and Defining, Avant-Garde or Experimental Film

By Fred Camper

About naming, no one has ever come up with a satisfying name for the body of work that includes *Ballet mécanique*, *Un Chien Andalou*, *Meshes of the Afternoon*, [Dog Star Man](), The Chelsea Girls, *Quick Billy*, *Serene Velocity*, *Zorns Lemma*, and *Journeys from Berlin/1971*, to say nothing of all sorts of more recent work by filmmakers such as [Su Friedrich](), [Janie Geiser](), [Louis Klahr](), [Brian Frye](), and others. I'd like to think the lack of a stable name is a sign of the movement's health. I mean, to take off on Gertrude Stein's famous remark to the effect that a museum can't also be "modern," if you know exactly what avant-garde film is and how to name it, it probably isn't very "avant-garde," right?

 When the North American branch of the movement first burst onto public consciousness in the mid-1960s, and naming became a real issue, various filmmakers expressed discontent with the names in use; some had expressed such discontent even earlier. [Stan Brakhage]() said the appellation "avant-garde" was too European. Someone, I can't remember who (I'd like to think it was Peter Kubelka, but I'm not sure), said, of "experimental," something like, "I made many experiments in the process of making this film. I left them all in my editing room. What you've seen is not an experiment, but a completed work. (Another problem with "experimental": at the MIT Film Society, where I showed "experimental" films from 1965-71, a couple MIT students once showed up thinking they were going to see films of science experiments! But then, we also had to give a refund to two nursing students who were not expecting an auteurist classic when they bought tickets for a program listed as "Bringing Up Baby — Andrew Sarris will speak.") "Underground" was critiqued from various angles, such as also having inappropriate European echoes, and I think Brakhage may have mentioned the fact that he lived 9,000 feet above sea level in a humorous rebuke to the claim that he was an "underground" filmmaker. "Independent" quickly ran into the problem that, in the Hollywood nomenclature of the time, Disney was an "independent" studio, and now too it tends to mean narrative features not produced by a major studio but with budgets of many millions. "New American Cinema" had some currency for a while, but it also included narrative features, and today it can also mean Hollywood. The then-editor of *Canyon Cinema News*, Emory Menefee, proposed "undependent," in the sense of not being dependent on anything, but that never made it into general use either. Presently I try to use "avant-garde," "experimental," and "a-g" all in the same piece of writing, as a way of naming a category of films while

also indicating that naming is still problem.

 So then, what characteristics might be said to be held in common among the films I've listed above and other similar works? Obviously there is no hard-and-fast algorithm for deciding what is or is not an avant-garde or experimental film, and there can be lots of "is it or isn't it" debates at the margins. But I think no sensible person would deny the appellation to Christopher Maclaine's *The End* or Bruce Baillie's Quixote, nor try to apply it to *Gone With the Wind* or *E.T*.

To decide the obvious cases, and help clarify what characteristics are shared in such work, I would instead offer a list of qualities, a six-part "test," as it were. Many avant-garde films will fail one or two of these, but I think that a film that most on this list would agree is "avant-garde" or "experimental" will pass most of them.

 1. It is created by one person, or occasionally a small group collectively, working on a minuscule budget most often provided out of the filmmaker's own pocket or through small grants, and is made out of personal passion, and in the belief that public success and profit is very unlikely. "Minuscule budget" means something very different from what the phrase might mean in theatrical narrative filmmaking; here it refers to a figure in the hundreds, or thousands, or in rare cases tens of thousands of dollars.

 2. It eschews the production-line model by which the various functions of filmmaker are divided among different individuals and groups: the filmmaker is the producer, director, scriptwriter, director of photography, cameraperson, editor, sound recordist, and sound editor, or performs at least half of those functions.

 3. It does not try offer a linear story that unfolds in the theatrical space of mainstream narrative. [The hypertrophic counter-example that proves the rule here is Hollis Frampton's *Poetic Justice*, which does tell a "linear story" — but the viewer receives that story by reading hand-printed script pages that are piled one after another on a table, not by seeing the script's story enacted on screen.]

 4. It makes conscious use of the materials of cinema in a way that calls attention to the medium, and does not do so in scenes bracketed by others in a more realistic mode that would isolate the "experimental" scenes as dream or fantasy sequences. [Examples: scratching or painting directly on the film strip; cutting rapidly and unpredictably enough that the editing calls attention to itself; the use of out of focus and "under" or "over" exposure; extremely rapid camera movements that blur the image; distorting lenses; extreme tilts of the camera; placing objects in front of the lens to alter the image; time lapse photography; collaging objects directly onto the film strip;

the use of other abstracting devices such as superimpositions or optical effects; printed titles that offer a commentary that's different from simply providing information or advancing the narrative; asynchronous sound; the cutting together of spatially disjunct images in a way that does not serve an obvious narrative or easily reducible symbolic purpose. I can think of at least one filmmaker — Brakhage — who has done all of these.]

 5. It has an oppositional relationship to both the stylistic characteristics of mass media and the value systems of mainstream culture. [Thus in a found footage film using footage from instructional films, the original will be reedited to create some form of critique of the style and meaning of the originals.]

 6. It doesn't offer a clear, univalent "message." More than mainstream films, it is fraught with conscious ambiguities, encourages multiple interpretations, and marshals paradoxical and contradictory techniques and subject-matter to create a work that requires the active participation of the viewer.

 Without ranging through the whole history of the mode, many landmark films seem to me to meet all of the criteria above, from *Meshes of the Afternoon* to *Fireworks* to *Twice a Man* to *[Mothlight](#)* to Wavelength to *[La Raison Avant La Passion (Reason Over Passion)](#)*. I don't propose any mechanical method whereby meeting, say, five of the six automatically qualifies a film, but rather suggest that considering these characteristics might be useful in thinking about this body of work.